

# How to make decisions by consensus

By

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# People are our most important asset

The way we organize ourselves is one of the keys to how successful our project is going to be.

Consensus decision-making is a different - and to many a new way to run an organization.

Consensus is about participation and equalizing power.

It can be a very powerful process for building communities and empowering individuals.

# Consensus decision-making

Content of my presentation

1. What is consensus decision-making.
2. Consensus as an alternative to voting.
3. The consensus decision-making process.
4. The roles in the consensus process.
5. If consensus is not unanimous, who must agree?

# Consensus decision-making..

6. When consensus cannot be reached.
7. Criticisms.
8. Historical examples of consensus decision-making.
9. Models of consensus making.
10. Explain the rules of the consensus decision-making process before you start the debate.

# Consensus decision-making..

Conclusions.

Suggestions.

Hope for the future.

# Ad 1. What is consensus decision-making?

Origin of the word "consensus"

*Consensus derives from Latin "com" meaning together with and "sentire" meaning think or feel = Think or feel together.*

# Ad 1. What is consensus decision-making?

As a decision-making process, consensus aims to be:

- Inclusive, include as many stake holders as possible.
- Participatory, include all.
- Co-operative, best possible solution for the group.
- Egalitarian, equal input into the process = table, amend or block/veto.
- Solution-oriented.

# Ad 2. Consensus as an alternative to voting

- Voting is considered competitive, rather than co-operative.
- Co-operative = Seeking compromise or other potential solutions.
- Avoid majority to rule over minority position. (Majority tyranny).
- Facilitate commitment of each individual decision-maker.



# Ad 3. The process of consensus decision-making

- Not so formalized.
- The practical details of its implementation vary from group to group.
- No specific rules for the process via Internet.

# Ad 3. How does it work

- Common goal.
- Commitment to consensus building.
- Sufficient time.
- Clear process.
- Check for consensus.

# Ad 3. The process of consensus...

However there is a core set of common procedures:

- Discussion of the item.
- Formation of a proposal.
- Call for consensus.
- Identification and addressing of consensus.
- Modification of the proposal.
- Repeated cycle until satisfactory decision is made.

# Ad 4. Roles in the consensus process

- Facilitator. Mediator.
- Timekeeper.
- Empath or "Vibe Watch".
- Note taker.

# Ad 5. If consensus is not unanimous, who must agree?

- Unanimity minus one
- Unanimity minus two
- Unanimity minus three
- Rough consensus (Example: The Internet Engineering Task Force, IETF working group)

# Ad 6. When consensus cannot be reached

- Declare reservations.
- Stand aside.
- Block. Veto /major objection.
- Break down the process into smaller areas.
- Leaving the group.
- A group may also ask a member to leave.

# Ad 7. Criticisms

- Preservation of the status quo.
- Susceptibility to disruption.
- Abilene paradox = A group can unanimously agree on a course of action that no individual member desires because no one individual will go against the will of the decision-making body.
- Time consuming.

# Ad 7. Critisisms...

- When not to use consensus.
- When there is no group in mind.
- When there are no good choices.
- When the issue is trivial.
- When the group has insufficient information.



# Ad 8. Historical examples of consensus decision-making

- Quakers.
- Christian-, and other religious groups.
- Indian tribes.
- Guilds.
- Hanseatic trading league
- Women's liberation movement.
- Anti-nuclear movement.

# Ad 9. Models of consensus making

Quaker model.

IETF rough consensus model.

In the Internet Engineering Task Force, IETF there is no description or definition of rough consensus.

# Ad 9. Models of consensus making

- The Internet Engineering Task Force, IETF believes any codification will lead to attempts to "game the system".
- Most of the work is carried out on mailing lists, where all parties can speak their view at all times.

# Quaker-based Consensus

Multiple concerns and information are shared until the sense of the group is clear.

Discussion involves active listening and sharing information.

Norms limit number of times one asks to speak to ensure that each speaker is fully heard.

Ideas and solutions belong to the group; no names are recorded.

Clerk or convener articulates the sense of the discussion, asks if there are other concerns, and proposes a "minute" of the decision.

Group as a whole is responsible for the decision, and the decision belongs to the group.

Clerk or convener can discern if one who is not uniting with the decision is acting without concern for the group or in selfish interest.

Dissenters' perspectives embraced.

# **Ad 10. Explain the rules of the consensus process before you start the debate**

Difficulties:

- The Global nature of mailing lists. Group not defined.
- Ethnic, social, cultural, and other possible differences.
- Habits.
- Wanting to maintain status quo.
- Wanting to avoid a decision being taken.
- One or a few persons are allowed to dominate debate.

# Conclusions

- Procedure only precisely explained in very few cases.
- Little or no real research on the matter in the digitalised society.
- Methods vary within the same group - from case to case.
- Avoiding speculation in the system can lead to obscurity- although we want transparency.
- Community rules = Often that no one rules.
- No facilitator = No continuation of the debate.

# Conclusions and findings

When two or more dominant developers in a project can't reach agreement on how to proceed there are several known possible consequences:

- Forking the project.
- People leave the project.
- Unsolved disagreement consumes time and energy from the coding, and steals focus from the project's goal.

# Conclusions and findings...

- A given project or social community or group can suffer if one or more respected hacker or contributor decides to leave the project in anger, frustration / disappointment.
- We do see these rivalries from time to time ...perhaps in order to establish who is the alpha male in the group? :)



# Photo of Alpha male :)



# Suggestions

As people are our "raw material", the "motor", and brain power in our projects it is clear that individuals are the most important asset.

We need strategies to recruit new enthusiastic contributors and to keep everyone happy.

# Suggestions..

More research is needed on this specific subject of reaching results by means of the consensus- making process.

Especially as the subject is of global interest in our digital knowledge based society.

I want to give credit and warm thanks to the many contributors to Wikipedia. Without their research I had not been able to tell you about my findings, and experiences.

# Conclusions

Business, government, non-NGO's and other partners do not have understanding or patience veil waiting for a given NGO to reach a consensus agreement.

Resent example:

The normalization plan for "Christiania". An experimental, autonomic settlement in Copenhagen, Denmark.

# Conclusions...

Research on idea- generation in large anonymous computer-mediated groups has shown:

Identified groups working with a supportive ally were the most satisfied and had the highest levels of perceived effectiveness, but produced the fewest original solutions and overall comments.

We don't know if there are correspondence or interaction between consensus decision- making and idea- generation?

# Hope

- Don't be discouraged when the going gets rough.
- For most persons consensus is a completely new method of making decisions.
- It takes time to unlearn our old patterns of behaviour that we have been brought up to accept as the norm.
- Consensus gets easier with practice and is worth giving a try because it is about participation and equalising power.

# Thank you for your attention!

Questions?

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Slides available at [www.easterbridge.com](http://www.easterbridge.com)

I am interested in hearing about your  
experiences.